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ABSTRACT

The history of Haitian immigration to the United States is chronicled, focusing on the American social context and the Haitian response to it. Four periods are distinguished: (1) 1957-64, when the majority of Haitian immigrants were from the political and economic elite, intending to stay temporarily, and eventually losing their sense of ethnic identification; (2) 1965-72, when a wave of politically disaffected immigrants coincided with an ethnic revival of Haitian culture, encouraging preservation of ethnic identity; (3) 1972-82, characterized by lessened efforts toward ethnic organization, polarization over language issues, anti-immigrant sentiment caused by a worsening economic situation, and internment in camps; and (4) 1982-86, beginning with the designation of Haitians as a group at risk for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), and including the group's realization that its future was in the United States. (MSE)

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Migration and Identity

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Haitian Immigrants in the U.S.: Migration and Identity

Ever since Haiti became an independent nation in 1804, it has been a nation which has had significant periods of both immigration and "out-migration." In its infancy, especially between the years 1804 to 1898, Haiti was an immigrant receiving nation. It was only during the later years of the 19th century that Haitian out-migration began. Modern Haitian migration encompasses four major significant periods.

FIRST PERIOD

Between 1957 and 1964, the majority of Haitian immigrants who came to the U.S. were from the political and economic elites. Some were former members of the mulatto class who had traditionally enjoyed the trappings of power and wealth in Haiti. Others were members of the newly emerging Black bourgeoisie who had climbed the social ladder through education and whose vehicle was the rhetoric of Negritude. Both groups tried to avoid identification with the indigenous (American) Black population. The attitude of the Haitians was more akin to the position of the Blacks as an under-class in American society, rather than one of racism.

Since their flight was mostly fostered by political reasons, these immigrants thought their stay in the U.S. to be temporary. Their orientation was towards an eventual dethroning of the Duvalier regime and a subsequent replacement of that regime with their own political machine. Adaptation to American society was not a primary concern.

Having lost their social standing in the U.S., because they could not practice their professions in America, the Black Haitian immigrants' economic situation became very precarious. As for the mulatto group, they had also lost their traditional social standing by migrating and being relegated to the ranks of the Blacks, which they perceived to be derogatory and degrading. In the U.S., they were

treated as "colored," the ultimate form of degradation in their viewpoint.

To escape that situation, both groups set out to "inform" American society of their "French" heritage and civilization. Yet the Haitian migrants failed to unite against the apparent hostile and uncaring attitude they had perceived in the host nation because the same racial antagonisms they had known and practiced in Haiti continued to polarize them in the U.S.

The label "Frenchie," pegged on them as a result of their insistence on representing themselves as being "different" from the general underclass, was not sufficient to warrant a positive identity. In the eyes of American society, they were still considered as colored. As a result, they redoubled their efforts to unseat the Duvalier regime, their only chance to regain their past position of dominance. Skin color, an important marker of superiority in Haiti, was no longer relevant in America since the demarcating lines are clear cut and rigid in this society.

That first immigrant group drifted away and disappeared into the fold of American society when their efforts to unseat the regime turned out to be fruitless. Washington, having come to the conclusion that a Fascist Duvalier was preferable to a communist regime in Haiti, made its peace with the Haitian dictator and withdrew its support for the exile groups. The majority of the elements of that class shunned Haitian identity in the U.S. Some tried to pass as Hispanics, some as Whites and others as West Indians. Most of them, having the wherewithal of adaptation, have been absorbed into the fold of American society without any sense of true ethnic identification. Their exclusive social clubs, bent on differentiating the immigrant population through color or intellectual achievements, were dismantled. Of that first group, little is known today.

THE SECOND PERIOD

Between 1965 and 1972, a new group of Haitian immigrants began to arrive in the United States. Discouraged with the political situation at home and its concomitant economic decline, and encouraged by the political and economic windfalls that had followed the wave of protests by the Civil Rights movement in the United States, Haitians migrated in greater and greater numbers. Spurred by the wave of terror unleashed by the Duvalier government, a more liberal revision of the U.S. immigration laws, and the persistent efforts of

recruiting agents sent to Haiti by American firms robbed of their labor force by the Vietnam war, the number of immigrants leaving Haiti reached alarming proportions. Their entry into the U.S. coincided with the ethnic revival that was permeating American society (Glick-Schiller, 1972). American institutions such as the Democratic Party and the Catholic Church, benevolent organizations such as the Ford Foundation and the federal government proceeded to educate the Haitian immigrants on the necessity to organize along ethnic lines. As a consequence, the mostly Black Haitian immigrants who had followed on the coat-tails of the first immigrant group began to articulate the needs of the Haitians along ethnic considerations. As a result, Haitians began to embrace and internalize the notion of ethnic pluralism as understood by American society. Because Haitians were linguistically and culturally different from American Blacks, and since they showed a clear dislike for the narrow ethnic constraints imposed upon them by American society, and since they also exhibited an exalted sense of national pride, they were seen as perfect candidates for a "new ethnic group" status.

THE THIRD PERIOD (1972-1982)

But, soon enough, the efforts to organize Haitians as an ethnic group began to lessen, even though the Haitian migrant population grew substantially. This retrenchment was directly connected with the phasing out of the federally funded programs and the dismantlement of the structures set in motion during the era of the Civil Rights movement. In the wake of the mild recession that had affected American society in the mid-70s, the resources made available by the federal government along the guidelines of "pluralism" were severely curtailed. Moreover, the Haitian immigrants who, up to now, had voluntarily segregated themselves from the American Blacks had to come to terms with the efforts of the native Blacks to speak on behalf of all Blacks, regardless of national origin. A separate identity was no longer a viable alternative for the Haitians.

Concurrent with the depletion of resources made available for the Haitian immigrants to organize along ethnic lines, the Haitians were being polarized internally by the language issue (Stafford, 1987). In effect, while the old immigrants continued to promote French (spoken by less than five percent of the immigrant population) as the language of the immigrants, the young and more dynamic immigrants rejected French and embraced Creole as the true

language of all Haitians. Yet amidst this controversy and the situation of marked decrease in resources, immigrants continued, nevertheless, to arrive in the United States in greater and greater numbers. Most of them were of low socio-economic status, of peasant ancestry and the greater portion were illiterate (Fouron, 1984). This debacle was caused by the smooth transition of power from Francois Duvalier to his son Jean-Claude in 1971. Although the latter promised an economic revolution and wielded power less brutally than his father had, political freedom was short-lived and repression remained pervasive. Moreover, throughout the 1970s, an influx of American capital in Haiti revitalized the economic life of the capital but failed to stimulate the entire nation. Those workers who could not be absorbed in the local economic boomlet but who had left the rural areas had but one alternative: to leave Haiti. Since most of them were unable to secure legal visas, illegal means were used to escape their desperate situation, hence the "boat people" phenomenon.

During the same period, the worsening of the American economic situation fueled anti-immigrant attitudes in the U.S. Immigrants were portrayed as competitors for the jobs of American citizens and immigrant workers were offered to native workers as scapegoats to alleviate their frustration. The American media presented the Haitian immigrants as ragged, impoverished, illiterate and pitiful individuals, unneeded and unwanted in America. Haitians and American organizations concerned with the plight of the immigrants complained in vain.

The treatment the Haitians received upon their arrival in the U.S. depicted their desirability in the United States (Portes & Stepick, 1985). While during the same period 125,000 Cubans were warmly received in Florida, the Haitians were incarcerated in substandard conditions that were so repulsive and inhuman that a federal judge demanded their immediate release. Moreover, the Immigration and Naturalization Services (I.N.S.) made great efforts to isolate these immigrants from their families or social advocates who were willing to assist them. To that effect, Haitian immigrants were interned in camps as remotely located as Watertown in upstate New York, and in Texas, and plans were in the making to transfer them to North and South Dakota. In the end, these negative attitudes of the larger American society towards the immigrants had the coalescing effect of instilling in them a sense of togetherness and brought them closer

to the American social advocates who wanted to assist them. But in the early years of the 1980s, that effort towards unity suffered a setback. The Center for Disease Control (C.D.C.), the official health watchdog of the U.S. government, listed Haitians as a group at risk and carriers of the AIDS virus, the only national group to receive such dubious distinction in the U.S.

THE FOURTH PERIOD (1982-1986)

The designation of the Haitians as a group at risk for AIDS had a chilling effect on the immigrants' efforts to present themselves as a separate ethnic group distinct from the larger Black population. The C.D.C. categorization negatively impacted upon them and singled them out as a group to avoid at all cost. The reaction of the larger community was swift and merciless. Some Haitians lost their jobs, others were ostracized from the community in which they resided; a few were physically attacked and harmed by elements of the larger population. The presence of the Haitians in the traditional working communities of the inner cities was viewed with suspicion, creating an alarming situation that bordered on panic. To protect themselves against such assault on their identity, Haitians began to pull away from open identification with anything Haitian. At the same time, the Haitian government redoubled its efforts to crush the emerging opposition movement that had burgeoned during the Carter administration and by that action eliminated the only viable alternative open to the Haitians, a reverse migration movement. Moreover, the U.S. Coast Guard was given the right to patrol Haitian waters, seemingly to prevent illegal migration out of Haiti, but it appears evident that the Coast Guard was also entrusted with a secret agenda: preventing a return migration movement that would do away with the Duvalier dictatorship.

Finally, on February 7, 1986 Duvalier fled from Haiti. Haitian immigrants rejoiced in the streets of Brooklyn, Queens and Manhattan and voiced their intention to return home to finally regain their dignity. Yet they were soon made aware of the fact that their years in exile had profoundly affected them. Upon visiting Haiti, they soon realized that the dream of a reverse migration was just that: a dream. Haiti could not offer them the trappings of the life they had known in the U.S., however precarious that life was. Besides that, although Duvalier had left, Duvalierism did not leave with him. Moreover, the immigrants did not have the necessary resources to

uproot themselves. In most cases, they lacked the educational credentials that would have assured them an improvement in their socioeconomic conditions. Moreover, they had failed to accumulate enough financial resources to provide them with a viable economic base upon their return to Haiti.

Haitian immigrants in the U. S. came to the realization that their future, however bleak it may be, resides in the U.S. Haitians both in and outside of Haiti see the colonies living abroad as being permanently settled there, yet both groups see the possibilities of using the resources of the immigrants to foster change in Haiti. The term "diaspora," which they have come to use, while carrying the implications of the Jewish experience has transcended such experience. Haitians living abroad are routinely designated as the "diaspora," but a diaspora which does not prioritize a return to their homeland. The Haitian diaspora is neither totally immersed in American society (not wanting to be Black twice), nor does it consider any longer its future to be in the return movement home. The goal of the Haitian immigrants is to enjoy the best of both societies. Living in the U.S., they can acquire wealth and education which can later be invested in building Haiti. Haitian immigrants living in the U.S. are Transnationalist. Total allegiance is given to neither social context (Fouron, 1985; Sutton, 1987; Glick-Schiller et al., 1987).

This attitude of the Haitian immigrants stems from Haitians' consideration of themselves as both an emerging ethnic group in the United States and a racial group with specific needs. Haitians also use their racial and ethnic identities to solicit help from diverse groups, including labor unions, the Congressional Black Caucus, Caribbean immigrant groups and the native Black population. At times they see themselves as a segment of the indigenous Black population, at other times as an invisible immigrant ethnic group, still at times as exploited Third World people, yet every time as Haitians.

The painful experience of exile, on the one hand, and being seen as a constituent of an exploited minority living under the aegis of a White-dominated society, on the other, has had a profoundly deleterious effect upon Haitian identity in the U. S. The efforts exerted by the host society to re-stratify and relegate the Haitian immigrants to the ranks of the underclass with the lowest status in America have contributed to the conflict over their social identity. Moreover, events in Haiti have also come to influence the realities of the immigrants in the host society, thus pulling them in opposite and contrasting directions. That duality in their social identity is not

rendered easy by the position of the leaders of the "diaspora." Their leadership remains fragmented. These deeply rooted divisions hamper the emergence of a unifying force that could bring their concerns to the fore. Different groups espouse different ideologies and seek to establish different status and identities for the Haitian immigrant population, thus inhibiting any unity that could, in the long run, effectively address their problems in the U. S. Transnationalism and the adaptation of a transnational identity represent attempts of the immigrants to come to terms with a painful and frustrating reality in the United States.

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